

# Minutes of the December 7, 2000 Informational Meeting on the West Mojave Plan and the Proposed Mojave Ground Squirrel Conservation Area

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This was an informal meeting between West Mojave Planning Team Representatives, the Inyo County Planning Department and interested members of the public on Thursday, December 7, 2000, at Statham Hall in Lone Pine. Project Manager Bill Haigh and biologist Ed Larue gave a presentation on the West Mojave Plan followed by a question and answer period. The following people signed in:

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## Introduction:

Bill Haigh and Ed Larue gave an introduction to, and an overview of, the West Mojave Plan. Some of the goals of this program include protection of threatened or endangered species and streamlining the permitting process for people developing project inside conservation areas identified as critical for the long term survival of, in this case, the Mojave Ground Squirrel. As it now stands, there are time-consuming and often inconsistent mitigation requirements for development in areas identified as being critical for the Desert Tortoise and the Mojave Ground Squirrel. Development is more difficult in these areas due to unpredictable compensation requirements and time delays. One of the goals of the West Mojave Plan is to have the requirements for developing these lands be consistent and up front so developers will know exactly what they need to do to proceed with their envisioned projects. Another goal is to implement the best possible program to conserve these animals.

There will be a series of public hearings on the final proposals for the West Mojave Plan which will likely be held in June and/or July of 2001. An environmental impact statement and report will then be prepared, including additional public meetings in the late fall of 2001. After the final EIS/R is completed, each land management agency and government entity will decide if they are going to sign off on the finished plan and, by so doing, received streamlined programmatic permits from the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG). For more information, interested parties are recommended to look at the

West Mojave Plan website at <http://www.ca.blm.gov/cdd/wemo.html> or to send questions/comments via e-mails to Bill Haigh at [whaigh@ca.blm.gov](mailto:whaigh@ca.blm.gov) .

**Question and Answer Period:**

Q: How will Fort Irwin Expansion effect Conservation Plan boundaries?

A: Not as much as initially thought. A new expansion configuration, endorsed in October 2000 by the Army, the Department of the Interior, Senator Diane Feinstein and Congressman Jerry Lewis excludes sensitive tortoise habitat that was within the Army's original expansion proposal.

Q: What will the compensation ratio be?

A: Not determined. The West Mojave Supergroup, composed of representatives of agencies, city and county governments, public land users, developers and environmental groups, and private landowners, is working to determine what this ratio will be.

Q: What types of future projects will the conservation area effect?

A: Any discretionary permit could be effected. Projects requiring ministerial, or no, permits will not be effected.

Q: What is the difference between ministerial and discretionary permits?

A: Discretionary permits are projects which require review by the Department of Fish and Game [such as a conditional use permit for a major subdivision, or commercial development]. Ministerial permits are signed at a local level and do not require as intense scrutiny [such as the construction of a single family residence or an add-on, clearing brush, minor grading].

Q: There should be more interagency communication. The Timbisha Shoshone LDEIS didn't mention that there was a threatened species (Mojave Ground Squirrel) on the Centennial Flat land release parcel.

A: You are right.

Q: There's already an imbalance of land in Inyo County (too much government land). Isn't there already enough conservation land in Inyo County? Will conservation ratios be the same from county to county?

A: There does seem to be an imbalance. However there are a couple places where private property could isolate certain ground squirrel populations. The conservation ratios will be the same from county to county.

Q: Will there be a preference in what is better land for land compensation?

A: Probably not (the Mojave Ground Squirrel appears to be a generalist).

Q: What are the chances of private land in Inyo County being excluded from the MGS (Mojave Ground Squirrel) Conservation area?

A: You can submit a request for exclusion. The Inyo County Planning Department has submitted a request to have all private lands and those lands proposed for release (as a part of the West Mojave Plan) excluded from the MGS Conservation area.

Q: How recent are the MGS biological studies in Inyo County?

A: The most detailed studies on the ground squirrel were conducted in Inyo County on the NAWS, at the Coso Hot Springs, by Dr. Phil Leitner. This is a nine year study that continues. In addition, very broad-based field surveys were conducted throughout the MGS ranges in 1978 and 1985; nothing of that sort has been done since then.

Q: Is MGS a federally listed Endangered species?

A: No. It is listed by the State of California as threatened.

Q: Shouldn't more studies be done on the health of the species before extreme measures are taken?

A: The plan has been worked on for the last ten years. Since the species has such a limited range and surveys have not been able to find large populations of the animal, biologists believe that enough studies have been done to determine the species is threatened. This is DFG's position – and DFG needs to sign off on the West Mojave Plan if the Plan is to replace the present system of time-consuming and expensive case-by-case permitting.

Q: Is one dot on a map from 1985 good enough to prove the MGS is still near Olancho?

A: We don't know.

Q: I don't want to have to pay for a MGS survey on my property.

A: Part of the objective of the West Mojave Plan is to insure that you won't have to pay for a survey and you'll know up front what mitigation measures you will have to do.

Q: How aggressively are you going to purchase property?

A: No property would be bought except from willing sellers. In any case, an "aggressive" buying strategy makes no sense for a buyer who could get land much cheaper from a willing seller in, say, the San Bernardino County portion of the Conservation Area – and buyers will have that option.

Q: Private property will be unfairly hit in Inyo County.

A: The boundaries for the Conservation area are a first attempt. Please submit any comments you might have regarding why individual areas or the County as a whole, should be exempt from a future Conservation area.

Q: How do we know what the MGS population is, if a study hasn't been conducted since 1985?

A: All the evidence points that the range may be shrinking near expanding population centers.

Q: Why is the line drawn the way it is?

A: Each dot on the map presumably represents a population and the squirrel can roam up to six miles. The lines were drawn to accommodate the species as we now understand its range to be.

Q: Is the MGS antisocial?

A: It is problematic to survey due to its yearly population changes.

Q: How negotiable are the BTA's (Biological Transition areas)?

A: They are adjustable. However, BTA's do need to be identified as part of the management plan.

Q: What do Mojave Ground Squirrels look like?

A: We're planning to load a picture of one on our West Mojave Plan website.

Q: Are they compatible with humans?

A: Debatable. In some areas, expanded residential growth may have shrunk the MGS range (the MGS is no longer found in Lucerne Valley). However, anecdotal accounts of the MGS have been reported from the NAWA golf course and from fallow agricultural fields.

Q: This is junk science. Your database is too small.

A: The database is small: this is an elusive animal about which little is known. The goal of this program is to make development more feasible in areas with threatened and endangered species.

Q: Could there be more MGS than we think?

A: Maybe; we don't know. The MGS the record does show them being located disproportionately near roads – which is where biologists have looked in the past. More study needs to be done throughout the range.

Q: How can we find out about what information was recorded at a certain dot?

A: Ed volunteered to help that individual after the meeting (you can e-mail questions like that to the WEMO e-mail address).

Q: If they have been found near roads, doesn't that mean they prefer that kind of habitat?

A: You should be careful and not leap to conclusions. This is hard to judge- rainfall accumulating on the sides of the road could influence this, but not in all years. Maybe biologists are just lazy. Studying the animal far from the roadside is time intensive, but needs to be done. This leads to a good point. How are we going to determine the success of this plan when the animal is so difficult to study?

Q: If you request a property to be excluded and you are granted it, will you need to obtain a special permit?

A: No. Those areas will be excluded.

Q: Will you hold more meetings?

A: Yes, in June or July most likely.

Q: Trona has been slowly declining in population. How can it affect the MGS?

A: The West Mojave Plan needs to take a conservative approach, in case the town should start to grow again in the future.

The meeting was adjourned and interested parties were invited to ask questions about specific properties, to look more closely at the plan boundaries, and to look at the County's Conservation Plan withdrawal proposal.

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